

Student Engagement in Public Universities in the Context of University of Raparin” Kurdistan Region-Iraq

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Abstract

To the best of our knowledge this is the first attempt to investigate student engagement in learning within the Kurdistan region in general and at University of Raparin in particular. Student engagement, self-learning, faculty-student interaction and promoting personal responsibility, besides environment of learning are the components for this research. Research has shown that the students who are motivated, engaged, and interactive are more likely to be successful during their study at university. In brief, this research presents a review of the literature and trends in order to determine the obstacles of better student engagement and student achievement in university of Raparin at undergraduate level sample study takes fourth year English department students and second year Nursing students.

Research Aim

This research aims to introduce, discuss, and develop a strategy for enhancing student engagement in public universities particularly, “UOR” University of Raparin, in Kurdistan region. The strategy focuses on individual roles and students’ responsibilities on the one hand, and teaching staff also the impact of the quality of facilities on the educational environment on the other. The researcher identified what aspects of university facilities, teachers and environment has the greatest potential to impact student learning. The findings of this research study has implications for setting a strategy that increases student engagement by providing better learning environment for students in university of Raparin besides, enhancing faculty-student relations.

Keywords: Student Engagement, Challenges, Public Universities

Method: - A hypothetic – deductive approach which accounts for consistency, adequacy and simplicity of research has been employed. It also accommodates my feasible point of view of Students engagement in Kurdistan Region-Iraq. Also, material adequacy has been achieved in the analysis of field work data. Accordingly this study is structured as follows: First a brief review of the prior literature on student engagement in public universities in Kurdistan region and followed by the survey conducted in two departments in university of Raparin, Faculty of Education-English department fourth Year, and school of Nursing Second year students. The data collected and analyzed with concluding remarks on student respond.

Background of Student Engagement in the Context of Kurdistan –University of Raparin

The debate of student’s engagement has only recently become an issue in the Higher Education sector in the Kurdistan region. To begin with, student engagement is now being taken into account as a major predictor of student learning. Kuh (2003) presents that “The more students study or practice a subject, the more they tend to learn about it”. Moreover, classroom interaction which is pivotal for building a healthy relationship between teachers and students has attracted the attention of Kurdish scholars and educators. Curriculum reform and development is undertaken by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, and their main priorities have been to reduce the traditional emphasis on memorization, teacher-centered classrooms, and traditional reforms of assessment. Student engagement emphasizes the importance of student-centered teaching styles that helps students develop self-study skills. Furthermore, it helps students grow self-confidence in the classroom. This makes students feel more relaxed when engaging in class discussions and encourages greater participation as the classroom environment requires students to actively demonstrate their abilities.

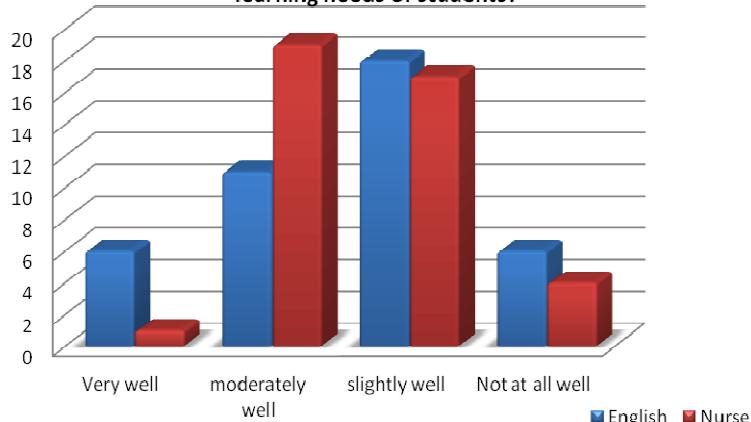
Three key questions should be taken into consideration; why is student engagement crucial for academic success? How can healthy relationships between students and teachers be established? What steps are necessary for increasing student engagement within classrooms at public universities such as the University of Raparin? The primary goal of student’s engagement is to boost students’ academic performance during their studies. To overcome the widespread problem of poor student engagement within Kurdistan public universities will require considerable effort. The key aim of this research is to determine why student’s engagement is so low and to find solutions for addressing these problems. Student academic performance is linked to factors that are inseparable from teaching and learning, and this touch on the quality of facilities available and the learning environment, and the capacities of teachers themselves. More significantly, student engagement is the way to encourage students to interact with their teachers, and increase students’ sense of responsibility towards their institution, and also commitment to complete their academic studies successfully.

Factors Leading to Low Student Engagement Within Kurdistan's -Public Universities: UOR as sample.

-Class Sizes:-

At this point, in public universities and in almost all departments the numbers of students exceed the capacity of individual departments to provide a suitable learning environment, particularly the number of teachers available. In addition, the classroom environment itself encourages only passive interaction during lessons and this result in low student engagement. Therefore, student participation is not as the teachers want it to be, as students are not fully engaged in the lesson and are less motivated. As a result, when there are too many students in the classroom, teacher cannot control the class, he or she is unable to pay enough attention to each student, as the time and space is not adequate for involving all students and developing interactive activities. In the Kurdistan region for many public universities, the classroom is a lecture hall and typically there is a single professor or lecturer who teaches in this large space. It appears that classroom experience in the KRG (Kurdistan Regional Government), involves less active participation by students and less individual contact with faculty members. The large size of most public university classrooms is due to high number of student admission. It is worth mentioning that student engagement is directly related to the learning and teaching environment, since the classroom environment is crucial for student learning. In KRG public universities, undergraduate students refuse active learning opportunities afforded by group work and collaboration with peers. For example in many classes students do not like to work in groups and they sometimes reject the idea of work together, especially in departments that have 60 or more students in a class. Facilitating active learning opportunities is very difficult for the lecturer in this context. The level of student engagement is also related to the academic discipline, and number of students in the class, my experience of teaching General English at The University of Raparin in which I taught students studying a range of subjects have shown different levels of student engagement.

How well do the classrooms at this university meet the learning needs of students?



The bar chart indicates the classroom environment in which students from English language and Nursing show a positive response as majority of students stated (slightly well). And specifically 18% of respondents from nursing department show moderately well for their classroom facilities and learning needs. In the majors that have the same characteristic and quality, students have close responds to the same question. The primary data in this research is close to what Lazear (2001) outlined as a theoretical model where class size itself is important due to the role that class size plays in setting the class room environment. Large classes (more students) may allow students to be more disruptive, allow them to "hide" from participation, engagement, or even attendance, while small classes may more easily lend themselves to pedagogical activities that improve learning, such as hands on activities and student-faculty classroom interaction.

Inappropriate Learning Environment

Many scholars have realized that the learning environment is very important in student engagement. In other words, appropriate learning environments would allow students and teachers to be mutually involved in the process of learning. This motivates students and makes them engage in their tasks in classes. Relatively, in UOR, however the learning environment is not that suitable in some departments and this discourages students from being successful during their academic studies in the university. Earthman (2002), illustrated that "school facilities had an impact on teacher effectiveness and student performance" Here teachers need to create an environment which is emotionally encouraging for students; learners need to be free to express their point of views about new topics. They also need to offer a different learning environment to encourage students who, for a variety of different reasons, feel negative about learning. Especially, those students who have become completely demotivated. Many university teachers are not concerned about creating a safe learning environment

for their students. Whilst, many teachers are aware that their students' engagement level is very low, they do not give enough attention to why their students might be disengaged and actively involved in their own learning.

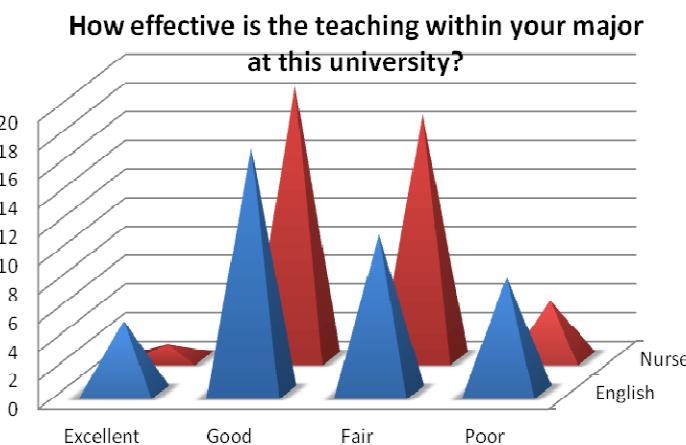
In certain departments, it is easy to observe the lack of student engagement, in which students are passive and not paying attention to the teacher, and they neglect participating in discussions. In such cases it is the teachers who are mostly to blame for their students' lack of engagement; instead the teachers blame the students, thinking they would get better results if they had a different group of students. Neglecting students is going to undermine any hopes of achieving a successful learning process; Christensen et al (1991) reported that "to teach is to engage students in learning." In public universities many teachers avoid having good relations with their students and so the academic relationship between teachers and students is very weak.

Many of teachers do not take the responsibility of involving students in the classroom-learning. Even though, student engagement is the teacher's responsibility. And also, student- teacher interaction has a great role in exchanging information between the teacher and student, since it creates a safe environment for learning. This is fundamental for collaborative learning. In Kurdistan's public universities, there is a lack of collaboration between students and teachers. Many university teachers still do not have an adequate understanding of different pedagogical methods for increasing student engagement in the classroom. In this situation, students end up not requiring knowledge and information, as they are not the focus of learning. The flow of information is focused on the teacher, and that does not help student develop self-learning strategies and it results in students taking no responsibility in the classroom.

Lack of Professional Staff

To frame the debate, the process of enhancing student engagement is not easy in public universities in Kurdistan region, but it is also not impossible. Many strategies designed by the teacher can be applied in class, and then shared with students. In one way or another student engagement can be reinforced by using different techniques and pedagogical approaches in class-teaching. Enhancing student's engagement during their academic studies whilst at university will encourage the students to apply the strategies they have learnt to their own learning and thereby enhance their experiences. Recognizing the different approaches that teachers use is crucial. There are two kinds of instructors in Kurdistan's public universities; modern instructors and old-fashioned instructors. Collating this information about instructors is a key step in improving student engagement. To clarify, old-fashioned instructors prefer to be the master of the classroom and they are the only ones participating in 'classroom discussion'; it represents the more traditional lecture style. Here, students are neglected and are passive in class participations. The teacher spends a lot of energy whilst in the class, whilst students spend no energy or time.

Very importantly, raising instructors' awareness of the quality of learning is fundamental, what should matter most to the academic community in a developing region like Kurdistan is the quality of learning at the undergraduate level.



Although, it is being stated that the quality of education in undergraduate level is low, whereas the present results in this paper are the average course ratings, in which 18% nursing students indicate that teaching is effective, while 14% from English language alleged that teaching is effective in their major. Mostly, students in both departments being negative is low, this proves that students are happy with their situation.

As teaching experience is not an obligatory condition for university employment, in some departments, the teaching staffs are not experienced or they are recent graduates with little or no classroom experience. As,

Gatbonton (2008) mentioned “there are often teachers who have less than two years of teaching experience”. Experienced teachers are able to change the flow of the lesson in the middle of the class; they also make effective contributions, to student motivation and problem solving during class time. Additionally, creating a calm environment in which students can talk and express their ideas is a key factor for raising student achievement.

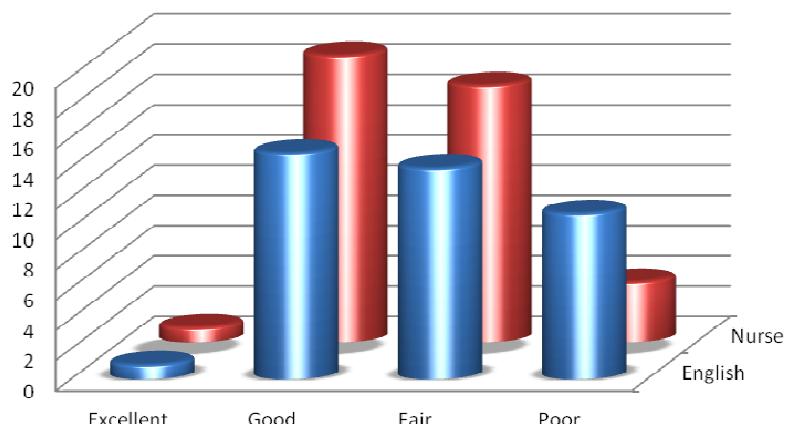
The University of Raparin: An example of Enhancing Student Engagement

Enhancing the Interaction between the Faculty and Students

One method of increasing student engagement is enhancing the interaction between the faculty staff and student; this in its turn will raise achievement. Within the context of The University of Raparin we tried to identify the variable that would affect students’ progress and we highlighted specifically the role of the faculty as the main variable which directly influences student engagement. Further closer examination of the influence of the faculty on student engagement is necessary. We will then be able to create the appropriate environment for learning on campus. Two models, developed by Tinto & Astin (1993) could be applicable. Initially, both models suggest that when students are effectively engaged in the college experience, the learning outcomes are higher.

The core premise of Tinto’s (1993) model is that “students’ decisions to persist or withdraw from college depend on their successful academic and social integration within the college”. Furthermore, this successful integration was dependent upon the favorable daily interactions between faculty staff and students” we need to recognize that in Kurdistan”, the interaction between faculty staff and students is not that strong, and barriers such as culture, or lack of experience in student engagement has had a negative impact on student engagement. Among the principles that have been stated in ‘Principles of Good Practice for Undergraduate Education’ Chickering & Gamson, (1987), seven engagement indicators are given that predicted whether the interaction will influence the quality of students’ learning and their educational experience. Three of these indicators reflect the current situation of student engagement in The University of Raparin; encouraging active learning, encouraging co-operation among students and, most importantly, the active promotion of students and faculty staff relations.

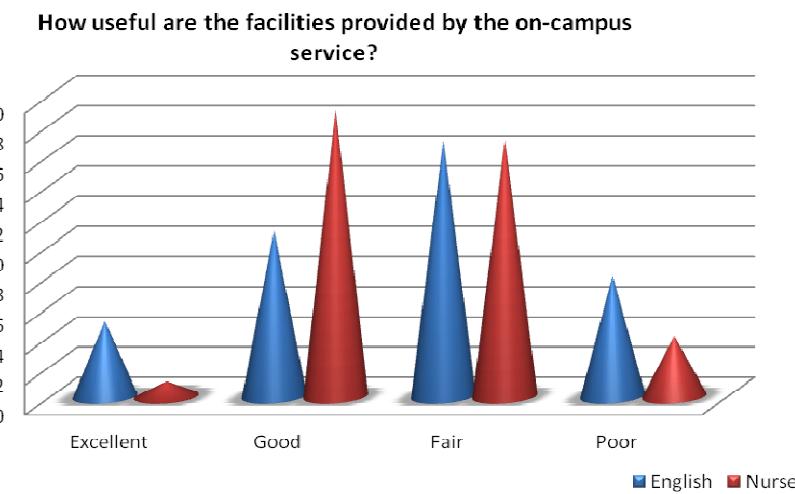
How do you evaluate teacher-student engagement in your faculty?



The Bar chart of the sample survey explains that majority of respondents in Nursing department stated their evaluation for teacher-student engagement as good, and the highest rated for respondents from forth year English department is 16% as being fair. Although, very few students in both departments indicated the interaction between students and teachers as excellent and being poor is 8% in English department, and 3% in Nursing said poor. The concept, Windham (2005) recommended for student engagement activities including “interaction, exploration, relevancy, multimedia and instruction” interaction as part of this research is extremely crucial since healthy relationships do help in supporting student achievements, as teachers via interaction can learn about how their students do learn. Similarly, if students are motivated to learn, they are more likely to engage themselves into the lesson or activity. Teachers need to find ways to motivate their students to learn, and once students are motivated their interest will increase because they want to learn and open themselves up to the information that is being taught to them .

Creating a Unique Learning Environment: - Creating appropriate setting for learning and teaching is heavily dependent on the instructors. As, the classroom is where students spend most of their time whilst at university. It is important to ask, to what extent does a modern, well-equipped classroom affect learning? However, particularly with the newer universities, not all faculties are able to provide the appropriate environment for delivering a quality education. With this respect, the classrooms should be physically comfortable for students,

both in terms of the space, facilities and, the temperature. A compelling factor for enabling positive learning outcome is a well-equipped classroom, where in students feel mentally and physically relaxed.



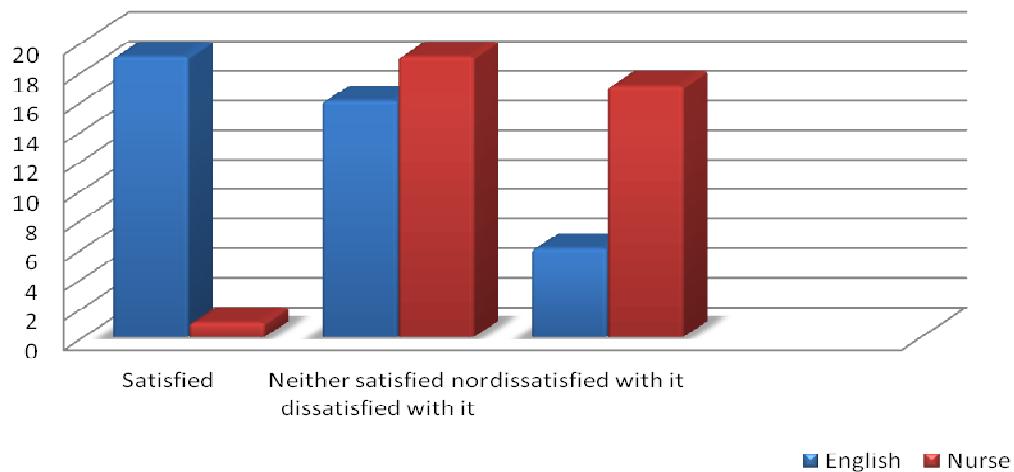
The above bar analyses the role of facilities in campus and the effect of well-equipped campus and classrooms on students' learning ability. 17% of respondents from Nursing said the available facilities in Nursing are good; compare it to 9% of students from English department who said well which is low. Roughly, very few students said poor in both departments. Thus, providing better facilities in campus enhancing student active engagement in particular when they seek to use new technology while learning. Sanoff (2008) noted that, the school environment affects students' and teachers' health, work, leisure, emotions, and a sense of place and belonging, hence, the physical surrounding in universities is crucial for teaching and learning.

Promoting Self-Learning Among Students:- It is vitally important to help students to understand the importance of self-learning more exclusively independent learning. To a great extent, creating culture of self-learning among students would help students to be engaged with the subjects' appropriately. Hubbard (1994), suggested that the students who demonstrated their independent learning behaviors could perform better than those who did no. It can be stated that students in Kurdistan region are also affected and dominated by technology which is a facilitator for autonomous learning. Hubbard (1994) suggested that students from secondary education level are not familiar with the procedure of independent learning. Therefore, they need to be trained at university level. Thus, teaching ought to be according to the needs of students, since our future will be knowledge economy society based highly on technology and globalization. Although, for young generation instructors who are net and technology generation social media devices are part of their communication. In (UOR) using social media need to be integrated in learning process, since it would increase students' interest to in- cooperate in learning. Usuki (2001) also agrees that students need to be trained and motivated to become independent learners. Consequently, in "UOR" a pleasant and supportive classroom atmosphere is necessary, in which an instructor can manage the class, and makes students to undertake the given tasks. In such case, the instructor needs to designate responsibility during the group works and tasks, by that he/she promotes inclusiveness in each students spirit, here students solely work as one entity.

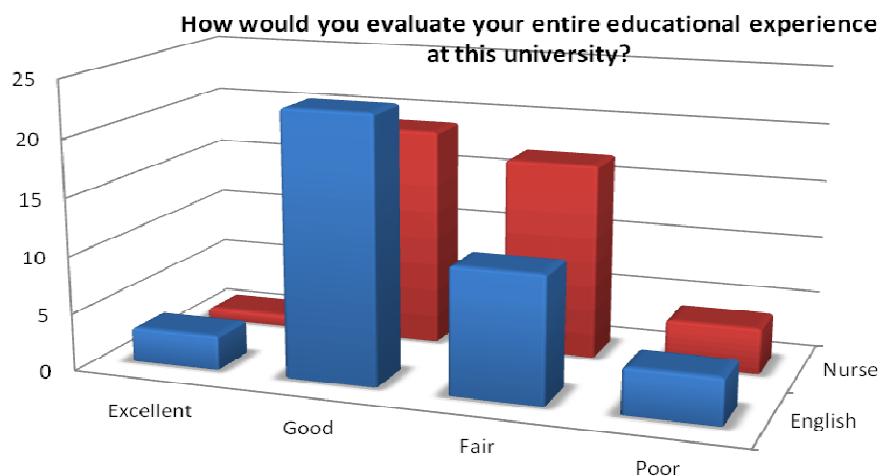
Maintaining Quality by Improving Student Performance

The main focus of private university is the quality of education and not the quantity of students being educated; this is a key distinctive when compared with public universities. There are fewer students in a class or a course. Many, educators think that the majority of students who go to private universities have a low academic level, or that they are too young to attend public universities. This requires public universities to raise the students' abilities in the first year of their study "foundation year". Focusing on skill development is a key driver resulting in a significant solution for remedying the lack of information and academic skills that student has when first coming to the university .Hence, Reinforcing Students' self-achievement is a driving force for academic success in University of Raparin and in the majority of public universities, enhancing students' abilities should be the main goal of faculty in "UOR" as (gilbert, 2007) emphasized that " in order to become lifelong learners in a knowledge-based society, enriching all students abilities to learn is essential". Though in Western countries student achievement is crucial, in Kurdistan family achievements are the tool behind student success. Simply, students generally think about family achievement not self-achievement that is why students are less motivated academically. Hence; students' engagement in general should be supported by families and faculty at the same time, as it is the biggest challenge for all educators in Kurdistan region.

Generally, are you satisfied with your experience at university of Raparin?

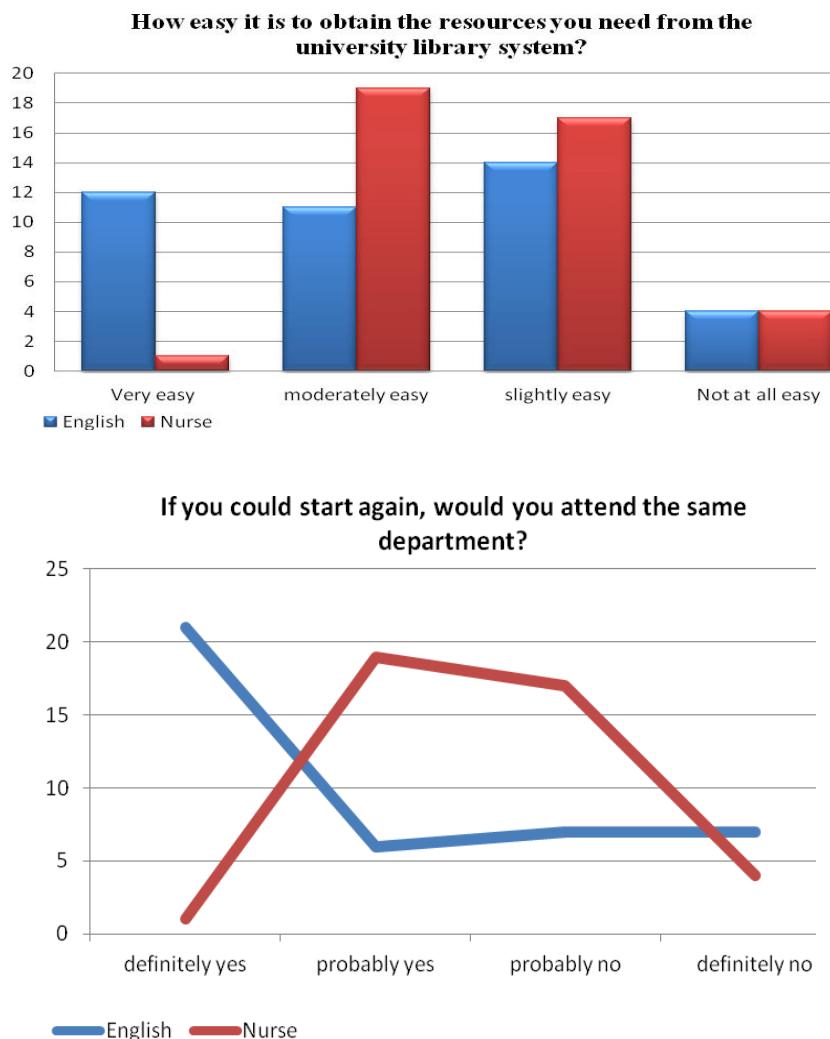


The bar chart above illustrated that being satisfied would increase students' responsibility for their future career and life, English language department students rated 18% as satisfied with their experience in university of Raparin. While, in Nursing 2% of respondents are satisfied with their experience, and being neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with in Nursing is 18%, besides being dissatisfied with their experience is rated 16% percent in all cases English language students are more optimistic with their experience during their time in university of Raparin.



In the similar question in the above chart over 19% respondents from English department are happy with their entire experience in the University of Raparin. And, 17% students from Nursing stated that their evaluation rate is good. This indicates that in both departments many students are happy and their evaluation is positive for their departments. Though being excellent is very low and also being poor is 3% in both cases. Therefore; expanding the students' capacity to learn should be initiated by faculty to create a climate in which students do feel motivated to learn. Thus, adjusting teaching methods and updating pedagogy of teaching should be taken into account in learning process.

The following bar attributes the respond of students towards the resources in university of Raparin and how to get them, over 15% of students in Nursing said it is moderately easy to get recourses. Where English department students over 15% stated as slightly easy. In a sense, students in fourth year have experience in borrowing resources from university library, while students in their early years do borrow few resources, as students have research in third and fourth levels.



The chart above concludes one of the remarkable questions in the survey, in which it shows student tendency and desire to attend university again and their current departments. 21% of respondents from English department has desire to attend again, where as 19% of Nursing students said probably yes to attend the same department. In both cases students' desire is quite high which is a sign of being happy and satisfied with the fields they study.

Concluding Remarks

To conclude this study, the external and internal factors have direct influence on students' performance at university of Raparin. The internal classroom factors are those variables that have a direct influence on student performance during his/her courses, such as the class size, learning environments, technology and interestingly the role of teachers. Together all of these elements require that teachers take seriously the need to engage all types of learners and increase achievement in the classroom. Educators must move away from old fashioned methods of teaching, such as delivering lectures and just reading from textbooks. They must embrace new styles of teaching and involve different strategies to reach out to all the different types of learners. This will increase student learning and motivation in the classroom and have an impact on other areas of life too. By this student will be highly motivated to attend classes and be more active in their own learning. Ultimately, university of Raparin and Instructors should focus on strategic planning for promoting student centered learning for boosting quality of learners.

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